



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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Meeting Date: August 13, 2020

Agenda Item: Bighorn Sheep Restoration in the Little Belt Mountains

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 minutes

Background: Bighorn sheep were historically common in central Montana's Little Belt Mountains but were extirpated in the early 1900s. After a reintroduction effort failed to establish a self-sustaining population in the 1960s, bighorn sheep began to naturally recolonize the range in 2014. Although the department has documented lamb production in the Little Belts annually since 2015, no more than six bighorn sheep have been documented in the Little Belts. Nevertheless, habitat models identify extensive, high-quality habitat within the mountain range. The department proposes to capture up to 50 bighorn sheep (primarily female) from bighorn sheep HD 482 along the Missouri River north of Lewistown. Conducting additional translocations to the Little Belts is included in the current environmental assessment.

Public Involvement Process and Results: The commission directed the department to prepare an environmental assessment of the project for public review at their June 2020 meeting. The draft assessment was available for public comment for 30 days. The department distributed the draft assessment to media outlets, conservation organizations, local governments, neighboring landowners, the Montana Woolgrowers Association, land management agencies, and others. The draft assessment was noticed through department news releases and was available on the department's website. We received 183 comments from individuals or groups supporting the proposal. In opposition, one asked to restore mountain goats instead of bighorn sheep, one asked to remove predators, and one discouraged proceeding because the reintroduced bighorn sheep could be unlawfully harvested. No changes to the environmental assessment were made based on public comment, with one exception; Montana Woolgrowers Association supported the proposal and offered substantive input that was incorporated. Region 4 Supervisor Gary Bertellotti signed a Decision Notice recommending that the commission approve the project on Aug. 4, 2020.

Alternatives and Analysis: This translocation may establish a self-sustaining herd of bighorn sheep within the Little Belt Mountains. Bighorn sheep are unlikely to establish a self-sustaining herd without a reintroduction, although conducting no action remains an alternative.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale: The department recommends proceeding with a translocation to restore bighorn sheep to the Little Belt Mountains beginning during the winter of 2020–2021, with added efforts as needed.

Proposed Motion:

I move that the commission vote to approve the environmental assessment and endorse the department's plan to reintroduce and restore bighorn sheep to the Little Belt Mountains in central Montana.